

Thailand MOPH is increasing active case finding of COVID-19 during the relaxed restriction period

The Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) is increasing active case finding of COVID-19 in risk groups especially in people who returned from abroad, healthcare workers, and people who live in crowded places following the relaxation of restrictions based on the decisions of the provincial communicable diseases committee. The 8th round of DDC surveys found that people are washing hands more often than before but there is a decreasing trend in wearing face masks/cloth masks.

On 7 May 2020 at the Emergency Operations Center (Press Conference), the Ministry of Public Health, Nonthaburi province, Dr. Suwannachai Wattanayingcharoenchai, Director General of the Department of Disease Control stated that currently, Thailand has found a decreasing number of additional confirmed cases. Therefore, the government has started to relax the measures. If people neglect their self-protection, the situation may worsen and cause a second wave of COVID-19. For long-term disease control, the MOPH has increased active case finding for at-risk groups and places instead of focusing on close contacts or family members. These are also included in the guidelines for the Provincial Communicable Disease Committee and the Bangkok Communicable Disease Committee to manage the active case finding in their respective areas. Thailand will support technology that saves costs such as substituting saliva testing for nasal swabs, and pooled samples (one time testing with 5 – 10 samples). The target for examination is set at 6,000 people per one million people and the number of examinations is expected to be 85,000 people per month.

The populations most at risk refer to groups that tend to gather in large numbers of individuals such as migrant workers who are living together in the same accommodations or factories, inmates who are detained in the Immigration Detention Centers, or those who are at risk of occupational exposure to SARS-CoV-2 such as those who meet a lot of people (personnel or ticket takers in public transportation and groups like healthcare workers who are more likely to meet patients). Risk areas refer to places such as markets, religious places, bus stations, sky trains, slum communities, etc.

In addition, from January to 5 May 2020, the DDC conducted 8 rounds of surveys (the DDC poll) among 27,843 target people regarding COVID-19 and social distancing measures. The results showed that the percentage of washing hands with soap or alcohol gel, especially before/after meals and after using the toilet increased from 61.2% in the first survey to 92.7% in the eighth survey. The percentage of wearing a mask when getting sick to prevent the spread of the disease increased from 56.2% in the first survey to 74.6% in the eighth survey. However, this is a decrease in mask-wearing percentage from the fifth survey (94.9%), which was during the peak period of reported cases.

Wearing masks among people without any illness has declined from 93.5% in the 3rd round of the survey to 75.7% in the 8th survey. As for physical distancing, there was an increase in correct knowledge among the general public about keeping a 1-2 meter distance away from others, increasing from 72.3% to 94.1%, but a reduction in the frequency and duration of going in public areas has not changed much. It may be related to a change of people's attitudes from the previous survey, that physical distancing can prevent the spread of the virus, decreasing from 84.8% to 78.1%. In addition, the general public wants the government to distribute masks at a cheap price, to provide alcohol gel at service points and to strictly screen customers of public places in various settings

"Although the government has relaxed measures, people must not relax their practices. The people should consistently practice to prevent COVID-19 by frequently washing hands, wearing masks every when going out, keeping space between others and reducing activities where many people join" said Dr. Suwannachai.